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A Threat to Arms Control?

The second round of the Geneva arms talks convened last week with both sides declaring the first round "fruitless." But a threat far more ominous than continued stalemate hung over the negotiators: this week, after protracted debate, Ronald Reagan is scheduled to decide whether to continue honoring the still unratified SALT II accord in the face of substantial evidence that the Soviets are violating it. The decision will be one of the most important of Reagan's presidency—and if administration hard-liners have their way, it could not only undermine the Geneva talks but begin to unravel the whole fragile web of restraints on the nuclear arms race that have been negotiated since 1963.

At immediate issue are the sea trials of the USS Alaska, the next Trident submarine, scheduled for this fall. Under the limits of SALT II, which both Washington and Moscow have pledged to uphold, the United States would be obliged to destroy one Poseidon submarine, in full view of Soviet reconnaissance satellites, within 60 days of the Alaska's first trials. But U.S. officials charge that the Soviets have already violated SALT II by developing two new intercontinental-ballistic-missile systems instead of one and by illegally encoding up to 75 percent of their missile-test telemetry. Reagan advisers unanimously agree that continued U.S. compliance in the face of such cheating sets a dangerous double standard. But they are deeply divided on how far the United States should go. "The question," says one U.S. official bluntly, "is whether to begin to unravel arms control in the hope that it can be woven back together—or whether to demolish it."

Hard-liners, including Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, Assistant Secretary Richard Perle and CIA Director William Casey, want to scrap both SALT I and SALT II. They argue that the accords are fatally flawed and that abrogating them could finally jolt Moscow into negotiating serious cuts in its arsenals. Moderates counter that shredding the treaties would allow the Soviets to expand their nuclear forces at a rate the United States could not hope to match. "They could build like crazy while we were still begging Congress for the money to buy the 41st MX," says one senior military official. That could destroy any hope for serious cuts in Geneva, moderates warn—and trigger widespread opposition to Reagan's policies at home and abroad.

'Cold Feet': Given such possible consequences, some top officials are urging Reagan to stop short of renouncing SALT II altogether. One compromise under discussion would be to violate the letter, if not the spirit, of SALT II by putting one Poseidon in mothballs this fall, where it could be reactivated if Moscow continued cheating. Another option would be to begin work on a Midgetman mobile ICBM that could be deployed if the Soviets deploy their illegal SS-X-25. Still, either compromise plan would signal the end of strict compliance, and last week skittish State Department officials weighed in with a more modest proposal: continuing to honor both treaties while asking Congress for money to deploy new weapons sometime in the future if Soviet violations continue. "Now that the time has come to respond to the Soviets, some people are getting cold feet," said one key policymaker.

The deep divisions within the administration are mirrored on Capitol Hill. Technically, Congress has no say in the decision, but some SALT critics in the Senate want to prohibit the use of Defense Department funds for dismantling a Poseidon. SALT supporters, meanwhile, hope to attach a rider to a defense bill calling for a one-year extension of compliance with SALT II, which technically expires Dec. 31. Last week House Armed Services Committee chairman Les Aspin also urged House colleagues to support the treaties, arguing that they are "the foundation of stability." If the Soviets greatly expand their striking power, Aspin warned, Reagan's Star Wars proposal "would have to defend against a new order of threat" and "a job that is already tough might become utterly impractical."

For their part, the Soviets have not mounted a major campaign to save SALT II—and they continue to deny that they are violating its provisions. But one senior Russian diplomat in Washington warns that reaching new agreements in Geneva would be impossible if the United States renounces the existing accords, and Western diplomats in Moscow say the Soviets would surely use any U.S. abrogation to maximum propaganda effect. And such a move would not please U.S. allies in Europe. Secretary of State George Shultz plans to confer with NATO leaders in Portugal this week, but the allied position is already well known. Says one British Foreign Office official: "It is one thing to put more pressure on the Russians and quite another to abandon the treaties altogether. That would do immense damage—and also give the Soviets a big propaganda victory, especially in Europe."

Test: Reagan himself has long criticized SALT II, and he recently told reporters that he saw "no reason" to continue honoring it. Administration insiders suspect he will opt for a compromise—but even the "mothball" plan could signal the beginning of the end for SALT II. Ultimately, the decision will be a test of principle over pragmatism in arms control. "This is not only the most important foreign-policy decision the president is ever likely to make—it also might be the toughest," says one senior administration official. The price of principle could be high, if it means a no-holds-barred arms race that the United States might not be able to win.

MELINDA BECK with JOHN WALCOTT in Washington, FRED COLEMAN in Paris, JOYCE BARNATHAN in Moscow and bureau reports

WALLY McNAMEE—Newsweek

Perle: The SALT treaties are fatally flawed

RICK WILKING—REUTER

Shultz with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko